



**Self-Portrait**

1930–32 / Abbaspour, Mitra, Lee Ann Daffner, and Maria Morris Hambourg. Iwao Yamawaki. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949 at The Museum of Modern Art

# iwao yamawaki: self portraits between europe and japan

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*Iwao Yamawaki (1898-1987) was one of these artists modeled in the Bauhaus that combined various disciplines: architecture and photography. He moved with his wife to the German school from 1930 until 1932 and produced a body of work that epitomizes what the Bauhaus was all about. In our western world, his pictures and collages are his most appreciated work. Indeed, his most famous composition "der Schlag gegen das Bauhaus" became a manifest against the increasing Social-National Movement in Germany the same year that the Bauhaus was forced to dismantle. After his return to Japan accompanied by his wife, Yamawaki took his focus away from photography. He had graduated as an architect before his stay in Germany and studied photography while it was there essentially because he was disappointed with the way architecture was practiced in that period in his home Country. It seems however that he has been criticized as an "amateur" photographer, and so he returned to architecture after his arrival to Japan in 1932. Yamawaki designed his buildings in a German-trained way, following the principles of a rationalized architecture. He tried to bring the "Sachlichkeit" to suburban and urban Tokyo. As bitter times were to come due to War, he sought to maintain involved in the organization of Exhibitions, including some that he was able to show in the Bauhaus. Inevitably, the paper will develop his two-faceted career as architect and photographer during the Interwar period. Yamawaki is a compelling case not only for this duality but because he is one of the few Japanese figures of the time that got to know Europe, the Bauhaus, and its artistic ideas, personally. So he could develop them in Japan where other aesthetics usually related to traditional architecture were preferred or either privileged by the reigning emperor and his administration.*

**keywords** Interwar, Japan, Europe, Influence, Bauhaus

Western architecture capitalizes the scene of the XX century. Therefore, researchers had studied how non-western architectures influenced the buildings of the masters. Still, it is evident that this cultural exchange could not be a one-way path. How, Le Corbusier or Walter Gropius for example, influenced designing in civilized countries outside Europe like Japan.

Pursuit and domestication of rationalism centralize the central theme of Japanese architecture during the late twenties and thirties. It is worth to notice that this situation is no different at all from what was happening in other industrialized countries.

However, the Japanese case is unusual, not only because its cultural difference with Europe, but because at the same time *modanizumu* –modernism– was expanding. A new Emperor<sup>1</sup> took the control in 1914 –during the Taisho Period 1912-1926– which tried to develop a style *teikan yoshiki* –Imperial Crown Style– for its related crown buildings along with an increase of military power. The image of the Empire culturally and military speaking was the one of the *teikan yoshiki*; not only inside Japanese borders but also in the increasing conquered territories<sup>2</sup>.

Naturally, there were also architects opposed to this aesthetics who tried to connect Japanese architecture heritage, particularly the *sukiya* –traditional Japanese residential architectural style based on the tea ceremony– with the new times and the new western architecture movements. Even before the journeys of Richard Neutra in 1930 or Bruno Taut in 1933-1938 to Japan, modern architecture concepts were already introduced and even built in Tokyo.

Some pioneers came in the mid-twenties or early thirties to Europe looking for working either for Le Corbusier or Walter Gropius. Iwao Yamawaki (**f1**) was one of these architects that decided to come. Rather work, Yamawaki opted to come to study in the leading German architecture institution, the Bauhaus. Therefore, rationalism and constructivism will influence his following works, either photography or as an architect, even after his return to Japan.

## bauhaus postscripts

By the 1920's new architecture ideas related to the Bauhaus and applied arts, started to be introduced in the country. According to Yamawaki itself<sup>3</sup>, the firsts texts dealing with the Bauhaus in Japan –*State Bauhaus* and *Bauhaus Postscripts*– appeared in 1924, written by Nakata Teinosuke<sup>4</sup>. Yamawaki even mentions "Young architects who were dissatisfied with the existing order of things and whose appetites were whetted by these new ideas from Germany fought to purchase books such as vol. 14 of the *Bauhausbücher* –Bauhaus Books– series, *Von Material zur Architektur* –From Material to Architecture–, by Moholy- Nagy, (1929)"<sup>5</sup> It was evident, therefore, that modern architecture ideas were making its path into Japanese architecture.

However, due to the difficulties of traveling to Europe, not many architects were able or brave enough to take the step. As a result, only three architects attended to the Bauhaus. The fact that the institution was forced to close in 1932 did not help either. Iwao Yamawaki and his wife, Michiko, were two of these three privileged students.

## iwao fujita

Iwao Fujita (1898-1987), born in Nagasaki, graduated from the Architectural Department of the Tokyo School of Arts in 1926. Since the beginning of his architect career, he was an active member in avant-garde circles. He became a member of the *Kenchiku gakkai* –Society for Architectural Research– and right after he involved with the artists' group *Tan'i sanko*<sup>6</sup>. Among these artists, the aforementioned Bauhaus student Nakata Teinosuke emerged. Thanks to him Iwao met the first and only Japanese student to ever attend to the Weimar

## **iwao yamawaki: self portraits between europe and japan**

Bauhaus, Takehiko Mizutani. It is not difficult to think that these two figures took a decisive role to convince Iwao to go to Germany to learn modern ideas from the very sources<sup>7</sup>.

Obviously, such a long and torturous trip was a pricey one. Here is where the figure of Iwao's future wife Michiko showed up. To meet the young and wealthy Michiko Yamawaki will change Iwao's life forever. Not long after they officially met, the couple got married in 1928. According to Helena Čápková, "the young Michiko inherited a portion of the family wealth when her uncle died prematurely. Iwao was therefore asked to enter the family and adopt its name, which he accepted, in return for an opportunity to study at the Bauhaus. Michiko's father, who spoke German and was aware of cutting-edge artistic production in Germany, supported the idea and used his nuances to turn the Yamawakis' study trip into a lavish and extravagant experience"<sup>8</sup>.

In a way, the Yamawaki family helped to bring rationalism and modernism into Japan acting as a sponsor of the young couple. There's no doubt too of the vast ambition of Iwao as he did not hesitate to take her wife's surname –a dishonor for his ancestors considering that Japanese culture until recent days was a patriarch one– in exchange for being able to study at the Bauhaus.



**f2\_Untitled**

1930–32 / Lagerfeld, Karl, Sischy, Ingrid and Howard Greenberg Gallery. Iwao and Michiko Yamawaki. *Iwao Yamawaki*. Goettingen: Steidl 7L, 1999

Even though this paper focuses on the figure of the husband, Michiko was also an important figure in Japanese design scene thanks to her textile designs<sup>9</sup> and her determination to create female groups and associations related to arts. She helped to strength the importance of women figures not only after her return to Japan but also during her stay at the Bauhaus<sup>10</sup>.

### **european trip**

As stated, Yamawaki grew increasingly dissatisfied by the prevailing practice of divorcing the design of the building from the planning of its structure. Stimulated by the Bauhaus literature that he discovered, he contacted Walter Gropius in Berlin, and happily he and his wife were accepted.

It is not clear however how Yamawaki was able to contact Gropius. The most plausible option is that he had obtained the address through the architects that worked with Gropius in Germany years before Yamawaki's departure. Kikuji Ishimoto<sup>11</sup>, Sutemi Origuchi<sup>12</sup>, Mamoru Yamada<sup>13</sup> and Chikatada Kurata<sup>14</sup> were expressionist activists that worked briefly in the mid-twenties with Gropius and created along with other two members a kind of expressionist organization called *Bunri Ha Kenchiku Kai* –Secessionist Architectural Group–. It lasted until 1928 and held a total of 7 exhibitions at several Tokyo department stores. Yamawaki would have met them in these presentations thanks to his active life in the aforementioned avant-garde circles in Tokyo and asked for help to contact and being accepted at the Bauhaus. The following report<sup>15</sup> that Yamawaki was asked to write during his stay in Dessau by Chikatada Kurata supports this idea.

The young couple (f2) left the country from the port of Yokohama in May 1930 to travel to Europe via America, where they spent two months in New York. They arrived in Germany in the summer of 1930, just in time to witness the forced resignation of the Bauhaus director Hannes Meyer. Fritz Hesse, the mayor of Dessau at that time, appointed Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as the new director following the recommendation of Gropius, the very first head of the institution<sup>16</sup>. Once in Berlin, the couple rapidly met other Japanese avant-garde artists like the theater director Koreya Senda<sup>17</sup> or the painter Ōsuke Shimazaki<sup>18</sup> and tried to form a design studio to support their modest living in Germany<sup>19</sup>. According again to Helena Čapková “the studio produced leaflets, posters, wrapping paper, window and interior decoration for Japanese restaurants in Berlin; these were growing in number, together with the expanding Japanese community”<sup>20</sup>.

The marriage lived a very wealthy lifestyle socially speaking while they were studying in Dessau. The Japanese avant-garde related group always enjoyed gathering in popular bars such as Eldorado<sup>21</sup>. The network of people that the Yamawakis became part of was undoubtedly an intellectual one. An elite that after their return to Japan developed the modern culture before WWII and especially, rebuilt the Japanese post-war culture. Some of them suffered vetoes or even incarceration due to their political ideas. However, this was not the case for the Yamawakis who did not actively embrace political views neither tried to involve in socio-political movements<sup>22</sup>. This allowed them to rejoin the Japanese élites upon their return to Japan.

The Yamawakis returned to Japan via Moscow in January 1933 and left together with most of the design group: Koreya Senda's wife Irma<sup>23</sup>, the Asahi newspaper journalist, Masahide Asahi<sup>24</sup> and Michiko's cousin<sup>25</sup>.

## reminiscences of dessau

Yamawaki's stay at the Bauhaus produced mainly two types of materials. First, a series of photographs made by him that includes a variety of themes from the buildings at Dessau and central Berlin –also some Dutch buildings– to self-portraits and abstract pictures of ordinary objects. On the other hand, after his return to Japan and close to the beginning of the War, Yamawaki produced a book entitled *The Zelkova Tree*<sup>26</sup>. The book consisted of a collection of essays that included journal entries from his time at the Bauhaus under the name of *Reminiscences of Dessau*.

## der schlag gegen das bauhaus

Although being an architect, Iwao opted for the photography workshop taught by Walter Peterhans. There he improved and developed his photography knowledge and techniques as well as his photomontage skills. Thanks to this aptitudes, Yamawaki was able to produce in 1932 his most renowned work in the western world *Attack on the Bauhaus*<sup>27</sup>

## iwao yamawaki: self portraits between europe and japan

(f3). Ken Tadashi clearly explains what this image meant “Yamawaki explicitly depicted the decisive end of Dessau Bauhaus in 1932 through a photo collage expressing both the school's aesthetic pedagogy and its tumultuous political struggles through its short history”<sup>28</sup>. As the same author states, the Nazi Party put forward a bill in August 1932 that obtained a majority of votes to close the Bauhaus.

The collage itself was composed by pictures taken from the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*<sup>29</sup> –The Workers Pictorial Newspaper– and pictures from the main Bauhaus buildings taken by himself. As mentioned, Yamawaki spent long time photographing buildings during his travels through Europe in Berlin, Amsterdam, and Moscow. These pictures composed a reasonable portfolio as a photographer with around 50 images when he returned to Japan, but most importantly, let them debut as a reporter. In 1931, the architect Chikatada Kurata<sup>30</sup> asked him to write a review about the *Deutsche Bauausstellung*<sup>31</sup> –German building exhibition– held in Berlin from 9 May to August 1932<sup>32</sup>. The main characteristic of his images was the diagonal perspective from where it took the photographs. Buildings were usually taken from the corner and vertically shifted. So, vertical neither horizontal lines emerge.

(f4). This idea strength the sense that Yamawaki used photography to compose and not to catalogue people or objects. His photographs are far from being similar to the ones taken of the same buildings by Siegfried Giedion, who, as a historian architect, tried to portray buildings to obtain a general image of each building<sup>33</sup>.



### f3\_Der Schlag gegen das Bauhaus –Attack on the Bauhaus-

1932 / Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin. Abbaspour, Mitra, Lee Ann Daffner, and Maria Morris Hambourg. Iwao Yamawaki. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949 at The Museum of Modern Art. Reproduced in Kokusai-Kenchiku -International architecture- 8, n.12. December 1932

Apart from the architecture theme, Yamawaki tried to portrait other subjects. Therefore, the realities photographed were several. He took photographs of him, of her wife, portraits of themselves and their activities in the school. He tried to frame people, objects exposing the ideas taught in the Bauhaus. Recently, the New York based gallery Howard Greenberg<sup>34</sup> with the help of Karl Lagerfeld<sup>35</sup> and Ingrid Sischy<sup>36</sup> has compiled most of these photographs Iwao Yamawaki. As Sischy states in her book introduction “Yamawaki did more

than take the ideas of the Bauhaus and simply apply them. He brought his own culture with him too; the combination made pictures that really stand out... Whether one is looking at his photographs of architecture, his portraits, his images of furniture, or his pictures of objects –such as the two gloriously simple shots of a bowl (f5) that are in this book– one has the sense that one is looking at sculpture and drawing as well as at photography<sup>37</sup>.

It must be noted that Yamawaki, dissatisfied with the lack of criticality in the photographic scene in Japan summed to some critics that he received about his images, eventually quit photography completely after his return to Nippon<sup>38</sup>.



**f4\_Shellhaus –Building of the Shell Company- in Berlin**

1931 / Lagerfeld, Karl, Sischy, Ingrid and Howard Greenberg Gallery. Iwao Yamawaki. *Iwao Yamawaki*. Goettingen: Steidl 7L, 1999



**f5\_Metal Bowl**

1933 / Lagerfeld, Karl, Sischy, Ingrid and Howard Greenberg Gallery. Iwao Yamawaki. *Iwao Yamawaki*. Goettingen: Steidl 7L, 1999

### **the zelkova tree**

"Although Yamawaki entered the Bauhaus at a time of great unrest, what sticks in his memory is not the bitterness of factions and political struggles, but the fragrance of Mies van der Rohe's cigars and the reckless gaiety of the "Bauhausfeste", those all-night parties where the director, the students, and the cleaning women would all dance together, and even the policemen who came to quiet them down would end up standing by the entrance sipping beer. And he remembers too, with particular fondness, Wassily Kandinsky, who was a father figure to him. He recalls how Kandinsky would pile up chairs, desks, or curtains –at times even the muddy bicycles belonging to the students– until they almost reached the ceiling, and then would have the students meditate on the massive heap until they could begin to see a number of simple forms, until they discovered what Kandinsky termed the *spanning* –tension– of form"<sup>39</sup> **(f6)**.



**f6\_Untitled**

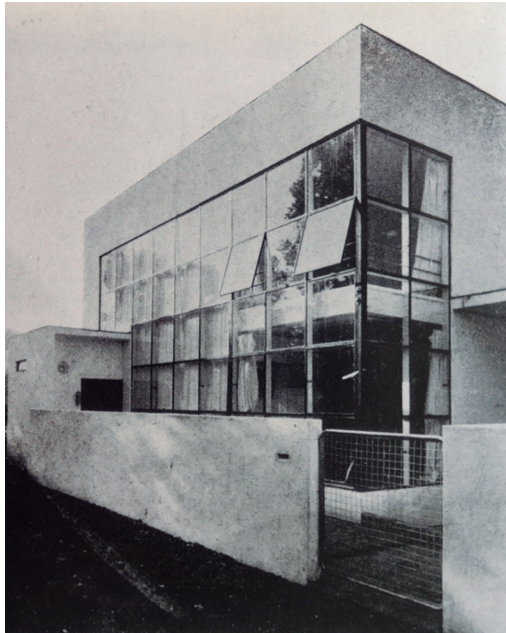
Dessau 1930-32 / Tate Modern. Iwao Yamawaki with Paul Oud. Tate Collection

### **trained architect in bitter times**

Parallel to Michiko's career as a modern textile designer, Iwao opened his own architecture studio, leaving back his photographer role.

The International Style was already developed in the country through some of the names already said: Kikuji Ishimoto, Mamoru Yamada and others by late twenties. By the mid-thirties, when the country started to visualise the beginning of the War and its effect, not many continue to design their buildings in a modern language. Nevertheless, Yamawaki, probably thanks to a joyful feeling given by its recent stay with Mies and the other Masters at Dessau, tried to design his buildings according to what he learnt in Germany. It should be pointed that, after the War, a similar to other civilized countries, modern Japanese architects, including Yamawaki, abandoned the International Style in favour of other architecture languages. However, Yamawaki always showed a common line close to the Bauhaus ideas as Y. Fujiya and S. Katsumata tried to demonstrate in their text *The Study of Iwao Yamawaki –Bauhaus Thought and Receptiveness in a Series of Housing Works*<sup>40</sup>.





**f7\_Migishis Atelier**

Tokyo 1935 / Stewart, David B. The making of a modern Japanese architecture. Iwao Yamawaki. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1987

Close to his date of return, Yamawaki designed in 1935 a joint atelier for the Migishis (**f7**) that is his best representation of constructivist and rationalist ideas. David B. Stewart describes it “as an attractive instance of *Sachlichkeit*<sup>41</sup>, here adapted to urban Tokyo. The atelier itself forms the main façade, which is glazed, as is the real wall of the cubical *genkan*, or entry, projecting from it<sup>42</sup>. There is no doubt that one of the primary intentions of Yamawaki was to prove the validity of the modern architecture language in Japan as a response to the prevailing tradition.

This example of Yamawaki’s architecture together with the shown collages and photographs draw a comprehensive image of a modern artist, an architect, and a photographer, in the line of the Avant-garde ideals taught at the Bauhaus that tried to connect all artistic disciplines to understand and design better form and space.

## endnotes

1. Emperor Taishō was the 123rd Emperor of Japan, according to the traditional order of succession, reigning from 30 July 1912 until his death in 1926 –Taishō Period–
2. Japan occupied part of China –Manchuria in 1930– and by that time, Seoul, now South Korea, was part of Japan
3. Iwao Yamawaki, “Reminiscences of Dessau” *Design Issues* 2, no. 2 (Cambridge: The MIT Press 1985), 56–68
4. The only Japanese to ever visited Weimar Bauhaus together with Horiguchi Sutemi. It is possible to read Nakata's given name as *Sadanosuke* rather than Teinosuke or, even *Jonosuke*
5. Iwao Yamawaki, “Reminiscences of Dessau”, 56
6. Michael Siebenbrodt and Lutz Schöbe, *Bauhaus-Fotografie: aus der Sammlung der Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau* (New York: Parkstone Press International 2009), 194
7. Helena Čapkova, “Transnational Networkers— Iwao and Michiko Yamawaki and the Formation of Japanese Modernist Design” *Journal of Design History* Vol. 27 No. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), 370
8. Helena Čapkova, “Transnational Networkers— Iwao and Michiko Yamawaki and the Formation of Japanese Modernist Design”, 372
9. Michiko designed the textile section of the Gropius and Bauhaus Exhibition held in Tokyo in 1950, as well as the design for the “Bauhaus Textile Exhibition” in 1933
10. Helena Čapkova, “Transnational Networkers— Iwao and Michiko Yamawaki and the Formation of Japanese Modernist Design”, 375–376
11. K. Ishimoto studied briefly with W. Gropius in 1922. The first Japanese architect to get it
12. S. Horiguchi visited the Bauhaus in 1924. After, he went to Greece probably following the path of Le Corbusier's trip
13. M. Yamada attended while visiting Europe to the CIAM II in Frankfurt in 1929
14. C. Kurata travelled to Europe between 1930–31 meeting Bauhaus students
15. This report will be widely explained later
16. Iwao Yamawaki, “Reminiscences of Dessau”, 56–57
17. Koreya Senda was a Japanese stage director, translator, and actor. He was also a leader in the modern theatre movement in Japan and performed works that bridged the gap from age-old traditional theatre to politically oriented avant-garde and modern works
18. Osuke Shimazaki works were rarely revealed to the public. He was a kind of “Phantom Painter”, whose one-man exhibition was held only once in 1971
19. Helena Čapkova, “Transnational Networkers— Iwao and Michiko Yamawaki and the Formation of Japanese Modernist Design”, 373
20. *Ib.*
21. Eldorado was the name of at least five local LGBT environment in pre-World War II Berlin. Between them, two of their locals with transvestites shows (men and women) were legendary and immortalized by writers and painters
22. Yamawaki encountered problematic the continuous political arguments within the school according to Ken Tadashi Oshima, “Complexities of the Collage Iwao Yamawaki's Attack on the Bauhaus” *Bauhaus. A conceptual Model* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag 2009), 323–326
23. Theatre director and theorist Seki Sano, who later went to Mexico and became a key figure in Mexican modern theatre
24. In 1936 he adopted the name Asahi Yasuhiro
25. Helena Čapkova, “Transnational Networkers– Iwao and Michiko Yamawaki and the Formation of Japanese Modernist Design”, 375
26. Zelkova is a species of flowering plant native to Japan and is often grown as an ornamental tree or used in bonsai
27. The photomontage of the Nazis attacking the Bauhaus was too strong to be presented in Germany, however it was published in black and white in December 1932 together with the article ‘The closing of Bauhaus’ (dated 4 September 1932) in the magazine *Kokusai Kenchiku* –International Architecture–
28. Ken Tadashi Oshima, “Complexities of the Collage Iwao Yamawaki's Attack on the Bauhaus”, 326
29. A left-wing worker's magazine popular within the Bauhaus students

30. Already mentioned as one of the members of the mentioned *Bunri Ha* group
31. The German Building Exhibition in Berlin in 1931 was the most comprehensive review of the Weimar Republic contemporary architecture
32. The review was printed in *Kokusai Kenchiku* magazine in July 1931
33. The Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture –gta Zurich– has recently published a book S. Giedion's photographs during his career.
34. Formerly a photographer and founder of The Center for Photography in Woodstock in 1977.
35. Karl Otto Lagerfeld is a German fashion designer, artist, photographer, and creative director of the fashion house Chanel
36. Ingrid Barbara Sischy was a South African-born American writer and art critic and most well known as the editor of Andy Warhol's Interview Magazine from 1989 until 2008
37. Lagerfeld, Sischy and Yamawaki, *Iwao Yamawaki*, (Goettingen: Steidl 7L 1999), Introduction
38. Ib.
39. Iwao Yamawaki, "Reminiscences of Dessau", 58
40. Y. Fujiya & S. Katsumata, "The Study of Iwao Yamawaki-Bauhaus Thought and Receptiveness in a Series of Housing Works", Nihon Daigaku, 43rd Creative Design Conference Paper, (2010), 289–92
41. It has no exact translation, but in general it refers to a concept of objectivity.
42. David B. Stewart, *The making of a modern Japanese architecture* (Tokyo: Kodansha International 1987), 159

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**CV**

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